

Virginia Barrier Island/Lagoon Important Bird Area Fact Sheet

Location: Accomack and Northampton Counties

Total Size : 105,249 ha (259,965 acres)

Elevation: 0-15 m (0-49 feet)

Site Description: The Virginia Barrier Island/Lagoon system includes the seaward margin of the lower Delmarva Peninsula from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay to the MD-VA border. This location is the most important bird are in Virginia and one of the most important bird areas along the Atlantic Coast of North America. The area has been designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Site with international status and is the site of a National Science Foundation Long-term Ecological Research site and the focus of a multi-organizational partnership dedicated to bird conservation. The area includes the most pristine chain of barrier islands along the Atlantic Coast, maritime forests, extensive salt marshes, inter-tidal mudflats, and open water. Although much of the system is currently owned by government agencies and conservation organizations, numerous conservation challenges remain.

Protection: A significant portion of the Virginia Barrier Island/Lagoon Important Bird Area is owned and protected to meet conservation objectives. Most of the habitat contained within the 14 barrier islands is owned by The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NASA, and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Natural Heritage with relatively few private holdings. Much of the extensive tidal marsh within the site is owned by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NASA, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Royal Tern

Birds: The Virginia Barrier Island/Lagoon System supports the highest diversity and density of birds of conservation concern within Virginia. Several beach-nesting species such as the Piping Plover, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, Gull-billed Tern, Least Tern, and Black Skimmer that are of high regional or national concern nest exclusively or nearly so within this system. The area supports the most significant breeding populations in the state of waders such as the Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, Glossy Ibis, and Black-crowned Night Heron. Marsh-nesting species such as the Forster's Tern, Seaside Sparrow, and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, also have their center of abundance here. During migration the area is of international significance as a stopover area for Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Red Knot. In addition, the area supports significant wintering populations of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Atlantic Brant, and Dunlin.



Conservation and Threats: Four primary threats are currently of concern including 1) predator impacts on nesting species, 2) loss of habitat to invasion by Phragmites, 3)

human disturbance during the nesting season, and 4) loss of habitat to sea level rise. Colonization of most islands by raccoon and red fox are believed to be at least partially responsible for documented population declines and low reproductive rates for some species. Current research and management programs are addressing this threat. Predation by Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls are also of concern, as is, predation by the introduced population of Peregrine Falcons. Phragmites has spread rapidly throughout this system and is displacing several critical habitats. Strategic research and management is beginning to address this threat though the eventual outcome is uncertain. The increase in human visitation to portions of this system during the breeding season is an ongoing concern. Management activities and ongoing educational programs are designed to reduce this impact. Like in many coastal systems, the loss of habitat to sea-level rise is a long-term concern.